Japan Goes to Hollywood: Using Film to Study Culture and Critical Thinking at the Novice Level

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INTRODUCTION

Most Japanese university students would be glad to use their English class time to watch a Hollywood movie. According to the EFL literature, they'd be making a smart choice as language learners too.

Richards and Sandy (1996) state, "The use of video in the classroom can be an exciting and effective way to teach and learn" (p.2). They note that videos can provide stimulating elements that aid foreign-language lessons. Through video, students can observe authentic language use in natural contexts, cultural details such as how native speakers live and behave, and visual information to enhance comprehension, including gestures, facial expressions and other body language. Lonergan (1995) and Allen (1985) concur. Lonergan adds that "video presentations will be intrinsically interesting to language learners . . . even if comprehension is limited," and notes that "most learners are used to watching television screens in a domestic context . . . for relaxation and entertainment" (p.5).

While the use of video in teaching English, and other languages, is widely accepted, the value of using full-length feature films is rarely discussed. For example, Lonergan mentions that "video materials used in language teaching can come from a wide variety of sources" (p.7). He describes broad categories of sources that include: language teaching broadcasts, domestic television broadcasts, specialist films such as

documentaries, language teaching materials, and self-made video films. Lonergan's list doesn't include the application of full-length films.

One of the premises of this article is that full-length feature films provide special opportunities for students to gain more than communication skills. By watching full-length films under the guidance of an English language teacher, students can analyze issues and practice critical thinking in ways that can't be explored using shorter videos and film clips. In good feature films, for instance, characters change, learn and grow as the story develops (Egri, 1960). Themes emerge from these character changes. These themes can be the content focus of a teaching unit, and analyzing them requires critical thinking. By watching full-length films then, for example, students can analyze the entire story to see if, how and why characters' behavior on a certain issue changes from beginning to end. Students can examine if, how and why particular groups who didn't get along early in a story come to learn from each other and develop mutual understanding and cooperation. For English language classes with a goal of teaching social-issue lessons, particularly cross-cultural lessons, these developmental themes can be very important for students to study. Selected feature films provide such opportunities. Below is the description of a unit employing three full-length films that I have used successfully to help novice English students at Asia University (AU) explore intercultural themes. I hope this unit proves useful for other teachers as well towards the ends discussed above.

JAPAN GOES TO HOLLYWOOD

The unit is called Japan Goes to Hollywood. I developed and used this unit during the past three years of teaching novice-level Freshman English (FE) classes in the Center

for English Language Education (CELE) at AU. Novice is defined by the 1986 ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) Proficiency Guidelines (Shrum and Glisan), the scale adopted this year at CELE to rank our Freshman English students. Using three Hollywood movies, the students critically examine social issues in Japanese culture and history. The three movies are *Mr. Baseball*, *Gung Ho* and *Come See the Paradise*, and the issues we explore are, respectively, cultural customs, cultural stereotypes and racial discrimination.

The need for this unit arose from problems that Visiting Faculty Members (VFMs) have acknowledged in trying to meet our department's culture and critical thinking goals and objectives, especially in teaching lower-level FE. CELE goal number two states: "Students will increase their knowledge and understanding of other cultures" and includes these points: "Students will increase their awareness and knowledge of selected intercultural issues" and "students will describe selected aspects of Japanese culture in English." While goal three states: "Students will develop their ability to express critical thinking skills in the English language . . ." (CELE Handbook, 2001, p. 38). Recent research has shown that CELE VFMs who teach novice-level classes have yet to develop a clear consensus on the need to meet these goals, the methods by which to address them in the classroom, and the means to evaluate their attempts to meet them when they try (Connolly, 2000 and Connolly and Hughes, 2001). The unit, Japan Goes to Hollywood, is an attempt to fill part of this gap by providing lessons encompassing both critical thinking exercises and analysis of significant cross-cultural issues involving Japan that can be used with novice-level Freshman English classes. All three films can be used in one academic year without stealing too much time from other goals. I teach the first

film during the latter half of term one and the other two films a few weeks apart in the middle of term two. They are presented below in the order that I teach them. Here are the lessons in detail.

Mr. Baseball: Examining Cultural Customs

Mr. Baseball stars Tom Selleck as Jack Elliot, a past-his-prime New York Yankee who is traded against his will to Japan's Chunichi Dragons professional baseball team. Elliot arrives in Japan as the quintessential ugly American, making cultural gaffes at every turn. This makes it a great film for examining Japanese customs.

It is good to introduce students to the concept of cultural customs before stepping up to the plate with *Mr. Baseball.* This year, I am using *Transitions 1* from Oxford University Press. Unit Three in this textbook teaches students to examine cultural customs, and my classes study this unit just prior to watching the film. If you currently aren't using such a text, introduce the students to the concept of cultural customs using your own materials.

Day One

I teach the film during four consecutive 45-minute periods. On the first day, I review the concept of cultural customs. I give some simple examples, comparing the U.S. and Japan.

In America	*In Japan*
Wear your shoes in the house	*Take off your shoes when you go in the house*
Eat with a fork	*Eat with chopsticks*
Shake hands when greeting	*Bow when greeting*

Then I ask students to brainstorm Japanese cultural customs, making a list of any and all they can think of in five minutes. After five minutes, they tell me what they came up with, and I write a master list on the board. The students in my classes have done very well with this task, and I praise their understanding at this point.

Next I hand out the assignment sheet for *Mr. Baseball.* The sheet introduces the main story line and explains that we're going to use the film to examine cultural customs, specifically of Japan. The sheet also contains four questions, roughly one for each day's viewing.

Question 1: Mr. Baseball makes many mistakes by not knowing Japan's cultural customs. Watch Mr. Baseball and write down all the Japanese cultural customs that Mr. Baseball doesn't understand.

I show about a quarter of the movie, and the students watch and take notes. I stop the video, and ask the students to talk in pairs or groups to compare answers and lists. Because this is a challenging analytical chore and not conversation practice time, they are free to discuss in Japanese. Next, with some prompting, I have the students tell me in English what they saw. I write on the board the customs they have observed, praising their insightfulness when it's appropriate. By checking in with students like this after the first day of viewing, I ensure that they have paid attention, understand what is expected of them, and are on task.

Day Two

On the second day, I review on the board some of the customs that students have listed. I remind them that they are to continue to watch and list all the Japanese customs

that Mr. Baseball doesn't understand. In addition, I introduce and explain Questions 2 through 4. Here they are.

Question 2: What do you think of Mr. Baseball's behavior in Japan? Does he change his behavior during the film? How does he change? Give examples.

Question 3: When a foreigner comes to live in Japan, do you think it's important for him/her to learn Japanese customs?

Question 4: When you go to a foreign country, do you think that you will learn new customs? Will it be easy or difficult? How will you feel trying to learn new customs?

I designed the first question to keep students paying attention to the details of Jack Elliot's journey of discovery in Mr. Baseball. Up until nearly the end of the film, Elliot is still resisting Japanese ways of doing things, be they relations with his Japanese girlfriend and her parents, relations with his assigned interpreter, or the style of baseball encouraged by Jack's manager and teammates in Japan. Students still have ample opportunities to recognize and describe Japanese customs misunderstood by Mr. Baseball.

Question 2 allows students to analyze their own cultural customs and give an opinion about someone who is not going along with these customs. If your students haven't learned and practiced the English vocabulary and structures for expressing opinions, you might want to introduce these lessons also before studying these aspects of the film.

Questions 3 and 4, while not specific to the film, help students to put themselves into Jack Elliot's shoes, and analyze and express their feelings and perceptions of what it is like to experience a new culture. In Question 3, students can maintain their perspective

as natives viewing incoming foreigners, while Question 4 asks them to be the foreigner in a foreign land. These questions universalize the themes we examine in Mr. Baseball, asking students to take Jack Elliot's cross-cultural struggles and make them their own.

After we have read the questions together and I've clarified any misunderstandings, I show another quarter of the film. I ask students to consider Question 2 as they watch. At the end of the second day, we repeat the exercise of listing all the cultural customs that Mr. Baseball didn't understand in the second quarter of the film. For homework, I tell students to begin to think and write about Questions 2 through four, from what they have seen of the film so far.

Days Three and Four

The activities for Days Three and Four essentially repeat the lesson plan from Day Two, but increase the focus on Questions 3 and 4. At the beginning of the class, I review the four questions and tell them to focus on them while watching the video and to take notes. Before we start watching, we review a few customs on the board from the previous day to focus their attention. After watching, we list the customs that they recognized from today's viewing.

I don't ask students to discuss Questions 3 and 4 during class. I have several reasons for this tack. To begin with, opinions are not very forthcoming from Japanese university students. It may be especially difficult for them to give their opinions on a sensitive topic, such as this one, immediately after watching a section of the film. I want to give them time to think. Also, I want them to have their own original answers to these questions in their writing and not to simply parrot something they heard another student say, which some students tend to do if they have the opportunity. Mainly, the film lessons

are for students to practice critical thinking and cross-cultural awareness, not to practice conversation. Analyzing and forming opinions in writing are what I expect them to do.

I give them a full week to write answers to the four questions. I let them know I am available to answer questions at any time before the assignment is due. I encourage them, in writing their answers, to review and use any vocabulary or sentence structures we've learned and practiced in class up to that time. This recycles learned material in new ways.

Their thinking and writing on the film are generally very perceptive. Many students advised Mr. Baseball, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do." Below are some other student quotes. (Note: Some quotes contain errors in grammar and spelling. I quote them verbatim and omit repeated use of the convention *sic*.) One student wrote, "I think Japanese custom is difficult for foreiner to understand. But I think Japanese culture is interesting and wonderful. So I want foreiner to understand that." Another observed, "If I go to foreign country, and I have to learn new costoms, I would feel big uneasiness. Learning another country's costom is very difficult. But If I learn another country's costom, I would make a friend in another country. What wounderful thing it is!" Still another responded, "Mr. Baseball is very funny. I'm looking forward to watching movie again someday." Comments such as these keep me using the film year after year.

Gung Ho: Examining Cultural Stereotypes

In *Mr. Baseball*, it was the American in the midst of the Japanese. The Ron Howard film *Gung Ho* offers students another perspective on their own culture. In *Gung Ho*, we see the Japanese amidst Americans. The setting is rural, industrial, rust belt USA.

Michael Keaton plays Hunt Stevenson, a foreman from a failed auto factory. The story line is that Stevenson convinces some Japanese businessmen to come to small-town America to try to resurrect the auto plant during the 1980s' bubble economy when the world was looking to Japan for business insights. The strict, uptight, formal managerial style of the stereotypical Japanese businessmen conflicts with the brash and casual blue-collar style of the stereotypical American factory workers. The stereotypes of the Japanese and Americans are over the top, making this comedy a good, if blunt, tool for dissecting the concept of cultural stereotypes.

Like *Mr. Baseball*, I teach *Gung Ho* in four consecutive 45-minute periods, showing a section of the film each day, asking students to watch for specific information and to form opinions, which they'll express in English in class discussions and in written homework.

Day One

It's more difficult to introduce the idea of cultural stereotypes than of customs. Also, the issue of stereotyping is more delicate and laden with emotion and potential offense. These are also some of the reasons the lesson is worth teaching. On the first day, I ease the students into the topic with the help of some vocabulary and some brainstorming about cultural stereotypes before handing out the assignment and watching the beginning of the film.

I first give the students a sheet of vocabulary for describing people. The sheet contains about 40 English adjectives with their definitions, plus Japanese translations. We read the words aloud, and I give them some time to look them over, after which I answer any questions. Next, I hand out a second sheet, called *Learning about Cultural*

Stereotypes. It contains this simple definition of cultural stereotype: *an opinion claiming one characteristic as applied to ALL members of a cultural group.* The sheet gives the following examples: *Americans are fat. Japanese people are too shy. Chinese people talk loudly.* In the next section of the sheet, I ask, *Please list three cultural stereotypes that you have heard, have been taught, or that you believe describe American people and Japanese people.* Underneath this direction I have the words *Americans* and *Japanese* with three point-bullets under each word. I instruct the students to look at the sheet of adjectives, and list three for each cultural group. I give them five or ten minutes and I walk around and help. After the time is up, I ask students to tell what they wrote, and I copy a few of their ideas on the board for all to observe.

The latter half of the sheet is designed to help them deepen their understanding of the concept. The sheet notes, *Cultural stereotypes are false, because they are not true of ALL people in a cultural group. Exceptions: Not all Americans are fat. Not all Japanese are too shy. Not all Chinese people talk loudly.* Next, I have the students simply copy the stereotypes they noted above into a form that shows the exceptions, *Not all Americans . . .* and *Not all Japanese . . .*

After arming them with their adjective sheets and a rudimentary understanding of cultural stereotypes, I give them the film assignment sheet. The sheet contains nine questions spread over four days. The questions ask students to analyze the movie and their own opinions from a slightly different angle each day. Questions for the first day's viewing are the following:

Question 1: Who is the main character in the movie? What country is he from? What is his job?

Question 2: What are the cultural stereotypes of Japanese people and American people that you see in Gung Ho? For example, you can write: "This movie shows that American people . . . This movie shows that Japanese people . . ." Please list at least three characteristics for each group from the movie. Give examples.

I read the questions aloud as students follow along. I answer any questions. I encourage students to watch and take notes. We begin the film and watch about one quarter of it. When the time is up, I ask students to think about today's questions and to note their answers. They can discuss with neighbors for a few minutes if they want to. Following this, I ask students to give their answers only to Question 1. I write some of them on the board. At this juncture in the lesson I don't ask students to tell their answers to Question 2 to the entire class. Students need more time to process answers to these types of analytical questions. I want to give them that time. The assignment sheet explains that at the end of the following week they will have to turn in their written answers to these questions. I tell students it's a good idea to try to write their answers each night this week, while the images of the film are fresh in their minds.

Day Two

At the start of the next class we review briefly from the previous day, and then I introduce the next questions. Today's questions ask the students to analyze the opinions of the characters in the film. The questions are the following:

Question 3: Do the Japanese and Americans like each other in the movie? Why or why not? Give examples.

Question 4: Today, describe the cultural stereotypes that the Japanese and Americans believe about each other in Gung Ho. Again, list at least three characteristics

for each group. Give examples. You can write: "The Japanese think the Americans . . . The Americans think the Japanese . . ."

Students watch and take notes. As in other class periods, when the video is finished for the day, students reflect and write, but don't report their answers to the entire class for reasons discussed above.

Day Three

Day Three begins and ends much like the previous days, with a warm-up review, instructions, and a reading of the questions to focus on while watching. After watching, students reflect, write their notes, and can compare their observations with classmates. Today's question builds on the earlier ones, this time asking students to form and express opinions about their perceptions of Americans and Japanese stereotypes in the film. This allows them to revisit the idea that stereotypes are inherently false and to examine exceptions to the stereotypes that they have observed in the film. The single question for Day Three is the following:

Question 5: Which of the cultural stereotypes about Americans and Japanese people in Gung Ho *do you think are true? For each of your answers, explain why you think so.*

Your opinion:

"I think it is true that American people . . . because . . .

"I don't think it is true that American people . . . because . . .

"I think it is true that Japanese people . . . because . . .

"I don't think it is true that Japanese people . . . because . . ."

Day Four

The pattern for teaching Day Four is the same as the previous. Today's questions allow students to describe how the characters change their views of each other by the film's end, and the last two questions ask students to sum up the lesson. As noted in the introduction to this article, opportunities for students to observe and analyze changes in characters' attitudes and behavior are some of the benefits of using full-length films in a lesson such as this one.

Question 6: Do the Japanese and Americans change their thinking about the cultural stereotypes of each other by the end of the movie?

Question 7: What do the Americans and Japanese think of each other at the end of the movie? Give examples.

Question 8: Did you like this movie? Why or why not?

Question 9: What did you learn about cultural stereotypes by watching Gung Ho*?*

Again, I keep using Gung Ho because of student comments such as these. (Please note again, the quotes are verbatim, errors and all, and *sic* is omitted.) "I like this movie very much. Because the Americans way of thinking and the Japanese way of thinking were different. But, they different accepted each other. And they make 1,500 cars. It's wonderful!" Or, "The end of the movie, Japanese and American change their thinking about their cultural stereotypes. And they received good point of each other thinking. I like this movie." Another student wrote, "Yes, I like it. Because this movie teach me that cooperation is important. And I was deeply moved by it."

Come See the Paradise: Examining Racial Discrimination and Prejudice

This three-video unit leaves the realm of comedy with *Come See the Paradise*, a 1991 drama about a Japanese-American family in California during World War Two. Dennis Quaid plays Irish-American radical labor union organizer Jack McGurn, and Tamlyn Tomita plays Lily, daughter of a Japanese-American businessman in Los Angeles. Jack and Lily fall in love. The war, with its conflicts between Japan and America, provides the backdrop for their love story, which contains its own conflicts on personal and familial scales. Thus the film provides opportunities for students to study some of the history of Japanese and American intra-cultural struggles, especially the racist U.S. policy of internment of Japanese-American families into prison camps, while students can also explore questions of intercultural relations in the love story of Jack and Lily. For these reasons, *Come See the Paradise* works well in the EFL classroom to teach critical thinking and cross-cultural issues. The themes of racial discrimination and prejudice are revealed in the film through several examples: one, of course, is the racial discrimination inherent in the policy of internment of Japanese-American citizens; another is the discrimination of California law which forbade interracial marriage at that time; and finally the prejudice that exists in Lily's father that Jack must struggle against as an outsider in love with a woman from a traditional Japanese background.

Day One

As with the first two films, I teach *Come See the Paradise* in 45-minute periods over four consecutive days. On the first day of this lesson, I introduce some vocabulary and a basic understanding of the concepts to be studied. Students are instructed to write definitions in English of the following terms for homework after the first viewing.

racial	discriminate	heritage	communist
intermarry	prejudice	intern (v.)	paradise

Also, I explain that we will be examining the concepts of racial discrimination and prejudice, for which I provide Japanese translations to get them up to speed.

After this introduction, questions for Day One focus the students on the story:

Question 1: Where and when does this story begin?

Question 2: Who is the main male character? What is his job at the beginning of the movie?

Question 3: Who is the main female character? What is her job?

Question 4: Where do these two characters meet and fall in love? Who introduces them?

As before, these initial questions focus the students on the story. After watching a section of the film, students note their answers for a few minutes. We review the answers together as a class. This gets everyone on the same page and ready to examine some aspects of the theme the next day.

Day Two

Questions for the second day ask students to examine relations in the story, the importance of which is discussed above:

Question 5: Do Jack and Lily's father understand each other? Why or why not? Give details.

Question 6: What prejudices and obstacles do Jack and Lily have to overcome in order to be married?

Question 7: Could you fall in love with someone who is not Japanese? Why or why not? Would your family be prejudiced against a non-Japanese person marrying you?

The personal nature of Question 7 requires students not only to examine the film, but to examine their lives and the values of their families. For these reasons, I don't ask students to share their answers orally after this class. They silently note their answers for all the questions from today. I tell students to expect to share their answers to the other two questions with the class tomorrow.

Day Three

We review Questions 5 and 6 as a warm-up to today's questions.

Question 8: What important historical event happens while Jack and Lily are separated?

Question 9: Where does Jack go, and why does he have to go?

Question 10: Where does Lily go, and why does she have to go?

After viewing another quarter of the movie, students note their answers. These questions focus student attention on the historical conflicts between Japan and America, and they require students to begin to explore and explain the circumstances of the internment of Lily's Japanese-American family.

Day Four

We review yesterday's questions, and then prepare for the final section of the film by reading today's questions.

Question 11: What do you think about the United States forcing Japanese-American citizens into the camps?

Question 12: How is your family similar to and different from the Japanese-American family in the film? Give details.

Question 13: What did you learn about prejudice and racial discrimination by watching Come See the Paradise?

Question 14: Did you like this movie? Why or why not?

As on the other days, students note their observations. I answer any questions about the assignment. I allow about one week for the students to complete their written homework. Students are challenged to give opinions on prejudice and racial discrimination in these questions. They must also reflect on their own family and describe similarities and differences with the Japanese-American family in the film. These questions bring the issues home for the students, requiring cross-cultural analysis, critical thinking and creative expression, the main goals of Japan Goes to Hollywood. Here are some of their reflections. (Again, I include their exact words, grammar and spelling.) One student wrote, "I think we should try to erase this racial discrimination and learn another culture." Another stated, "I learn racial equality is very important." Yet another concluded, "I learned what love is over racial discrimination."

CONCLUSION

One of the extraordinary things about these lessons is that they are completed by novice-level students who do much of this work in English. Students at this level can practice critical thinking and cultural analysis.

In addition to meeting the cultural and critical thinking goals and objectives of our Freshman English program, these lessons give students a welcomed break from the routine of working with the textbook. My experience is that it is time well spent. These

lessons are interesting, fun and educational. Students study English using the medium of full-length films, and perhaps hereafter will look at films in a new way, thus meeting another goal of our department – promoting autonomous, lifelong language learning. Students practice observation and analysis, and they synthesize their ideas to express their own opinions in writing. These are the fundamentals of critical thinking. Students reflect on their own culture and actively compare it with American culture. Some of the students own words, noted above, are testimony enough to the worth of Japan Goes to Hollywood as a sound EFL educational tool.

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